Ahead of Iraq Deployment, 37 Korean Troops Convert to Islam

"I became a Muslim because I felt Islam was more humanistic and peaceful than other religions. And if you can religiously connect with the locals, I think it could be a big help in carrying out our peace reconstruction mission." So said on Friday those Korean soldiers who converted to Islam ahead of their late July deployment to the Kurdish city of Irbil in northern Iraq.

At noon Friday, 37 members of the Iraq-bound "Zaitun Unit," including Lieutenant Son Hyeon-ju of the Special Forces 11th Brigade, made their way to a mosque in Hannam-dong, Seoul and held a conversion ceremony.



Captain Son Jin-gu from Zaitoon Unit recites an oath at ceremony to mark his conversion to Islam at a mosque in Hannam-dong, Seoul on Friday. /Yonhap

The soldiers, who cleansed their entire bodies in accordance with Islamic tradition, made their conversion during the Friday group prayers at the mosque, with the assistance of the "imam," or prayer leader.

With the exception of the imam, all the Muslims and the Korean soldiers stood in a straight line to symbolize how all are equal before God and took a profession on faith.

They had memorized the Arabic confession, " Ashadu an La ilaha il Allah, Muhammad-ur-Rasool-Allah," which means, "I testify that there is no god but God (Arabic: Allah), and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."



Soldiers from Zaitoon Unit pray after conversion ceremony at a mosque in Hannam-dong, Seoul on Friday./Yonhap

Moreover, as the faithful face the "Kaaba," the Islamic holy place in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, all Muslims confirm that they are brothers.

For those Korean soldiers who entered the Islamic faith, recent chances provided by the Zaitun Unit to come into contact with Islam proved decisive.

Taking into consideration the fact that most of the inhabitants of Irbil are Muslims, the unit sent its unreligious members to the Hannam-dong mosque so that they could come to understand Islam. Some of those who participated in the program were entranced by Islam and decided to convert.

A unit official said the soldiers were inspired by how important religious homogeneity was considered in the Muslim World; if you share religion, you are treated not as a foreigner, but as a local, and Muslims do not attack Muslim women even in war.

Zaitun Unit Corporal Paek Seong-uk (22) of the Army's 11th Division said, "I majored in Arabic in college and upon coming across the Quran, I had much interest in Islam, and I made up my mind to become a Muslim during this religious experience period [provided by the Zaitun Unit]."

He expressed his aspirations. "If we are sent to Iraq, I want to participate in religious ceremonies with the locals so that they can feel brotherly love and convince them that the Korean troops are not an army of occupation but a force deployed to provide humanitarian support."

(englishnews@chosun.com)